THE OFFICIAL BIRTHDAY OF THE BARNABITE ORDER

FEBRUARY 18, 1533

In the rather quaint language of the day, one of the original Barnabites thus describes the origin of the Order:

> *"The beginning of our Congregation was in the year 1533 in St. Catherine's by Porta Ticinese (Milan). The Superior was the very Reverend Sir Anthony Mary Zaccaria, a gentleman from Cremona and an only son; with him was the noble Sir Bartholomew Ferrari and the magnificent Sir James Anthony Morigia, Sir Francis da Lecco, Sir Camillus de Negri, Sir Melchior Soresilia, Sir Francis da Grippa, Sir John James de Caseis, and (Dionysius da Sesto)—all Milanese."*

The Barnabite Order was practically a direct and natural outcome of the friendship of five people, namely, Fra Battista da Crema, Ludovica Torelli, Anthony Mary Zaccaria, James Anthony Morigia and Bartholomew Ferrari.

A member of the noble Carioni family of the Venetian city of Crema, Battista (1460-1536) belonged to one of the two Dominican monasteries of Milan; but he was an itinerant reformer. Anthony Mary met him sometime in 1527; it was a crucial encounter. Recognizing Anthony Mary's potential, the experienced Battista persuaded him to enter the priesthood. The following year, Anthony Mary was ordained. He was 26.

Toward the end of 1529, Battista met the remarkable young widow, Ludovica Torelli, countess of Guastalla (a county seat located 90 miles southeast of Milan and 40 miles southeast of Cremona.) Soon after their initial meeting in the early part of 1530, at Battista's urging, Ludovica went with him to Milan and set about to gather a group of young women interested in charitable activities. On their return to Guastalla, Battista and Ludovica spent some time in Cremona where Anthony Mary was introduced to Ludovica by Battista. Shortly

after this meeting, Anthony Mary joined Battista and Ludovica in Guastalla where Battista had just established a cenobitic community. Anthony Mary was given the double task of county chaplain and Ludovica's personal legal advisor.

No doubt, capitalizing on the spiritual affinity of his two young disciples, Anthony Mary, he was 28, and Ludovica, 30, the aging Battista lost no time in returning to Milan with both of them. It must be remembered that six years earlier, in 1524, Battista had prompted Cajetan Thiene to establish the first Order of Clerics Regular, the Theatines, and was constantly on the lookout for opportunities to promote Christian reform.

In Milan, which was emerging from the worst period of its history, politically and religiously leaderless, Battista, Anthony Mary and Ludovica joined the Oratory of Eternal Wisdom, a fraternity of clergy and laity dedicated to personal reform. Here they met James Anthony Morigia and Bartholomew Ferrari, two young men in their early thirties.

Morigia belonged to a wealthy and aristocratic Milanese family, and had studied mathematics and architecture. His widowed mother wanted him to be an active member of Milan's high society but her son had different ideas and through some aunts, who were nuns in a Milanese convent, he began turning toward a serious Christian life style and eventually joined the Oratory of Eternal Wisdom.

Ferrari too belonged to a wealthy and aristocratic Milanese family. Having lost both parents and an older brother, he was fortunate to enjoy the loving care and ability of another brother, Basilio, a notary public. When Bartholomew was 19, the ambitious Basilio joined the clergy, but not as a priest, with the remunerative title of Canon. Not satisfied with this position, Basilio made a big move. He went to Rome to find success in the papal curia. He became an "apostolic writer," that is, a secretary for the pope, and found what he was after: money and influence. Fortunately for our Order, he remained very close to his brother, Bartholomew, although in no way did he share his religious ideas. In the heady atmosphere of Renaissance Rome, Basilio even sired an illegitimate child!

Meanwhile, in Milan, Battista, Ludovica, Anthony Mary, Morigia and Ferrari quickly discovered the great similarities of their views. During the next two years, 1530-1532, they kept meeting, sometime in Milan and sometime in Guastalla.

As early as 1530, Anthony Mary, Morigia and Ferrari had decided to start a religious Congregation, but Anthony Mary was still chaplain in Guastalla, where he was usually staying in a modest room of Ludovica's palace. Morigia and Ferrari lived in Milan: Morigia, still a layman, in his paternal mansion, and Ferrari, a simple cleric, in rented homes. Something had to be done. In fact, in a long letter of January 4, 1531, Anthony Mary discussed with both his friends the need of firmness and determination. Quite humbly, the young priest confessed: *"Oftentimes I am deeply annoyed at my grave indecisiveness which holds sway and for so long has hold sway over my soul."* (One may sense here a pious exaggeration!). Then, referring to their embryonic Order, he continued: *"One must think well, over and over again, ponder and ruminate, when something important is to be decided upon. But once the thing has been thought over and one has received proper counsel, one should not hesitate to carry out what has been decided upon. The reason is that in the ways of God what is required above all else is promptness and expeditiousness"* (*Letter III*). And he concluded stirringly: "*Come, come Brothers! If up to now we have known any irresolution, let cast it off together with all negligence, and let us run like madmen not only toward God but also toward our neighbor. It is our neighbor alone who can receive what we cannot give to God who does not need anything from us.*" (The words stressed above are etched in the soul

of every Barnabite since the earliest days of his formation).

As it happened, a favorable circumstance was seized upon to eliminate any further procrastination and a formal petition was sent to Pope Clement VII in 1532. The favorable circumstance was that the Pope was in Bologna for some business with the emperor, Charles V, and Bologna was far closer to Milan than Rome. Furthermore, Ferrari's brother, Basilio, was able to exercise his influence on the Pope.

We must take note that while the original petition is not extant, we do have a complete copy of it (Premoli, I, 415).

Logically, the petition opened first with Bartholomew Ferrari's name, followed by that of Anthony Mary Zaccaria, priests of Milan and Cremona, respectively. Then, three unnamed petitioners are also mentioned. We know who they were: Morigia, John James De Caseis, and Francis da Lecco.

The object of the petition was quiet modest. Obviously, there was no question of establishing a teaching order. Also there was no mention of systematic reforming activities among the clergy and the laity (as Premoli states, in a classic blunder, Ibid, p. 16). The petitioners simply requested the authorization of professing the three vows of obedience, chastity and poverty before the Archbishop of Milan or his Vicar General in spiritual matters (*Professionem trium votomm substabtialium religionis in manibus Archiepiscopi Mediolanensis seu eius in spiritualibus vicarii generalis emittere*) and to begin common life somewhere in the Milan diocese (*in loco Mediolanensis civitatis seu diocesis... Morari et permanere*) "in order to devote themselves more vigorously and unrestrictedly to God's gracious purposes and to probe more deeply matters pertaining to God (*ut liberius divinis beneplacitis insistere et quae Dei sunt perquirere possint*).

In an unusually prompt reply, Clement VII granted all their requests on February 18, 1533. It was also unusual, and probably a unique instance, to have an Order approved before it ever started. In 1533 there was no house, no community, no name, no habit. But, judging from hindsight, the Vicar of Christ acted prophetically.

For one thing, the acceptance of the petition prompted Anthony Mary to secure a house in order to begin common life. On September 29, 1533, together with Bartholomew Ferrari, he took possession of a small house near the church of St. Catherine dei Fabbri, at Porta Ticinese, but this house could only accommodate two people. By a special authorization of the Duke of Milan (October 17, 1533), they acquired a second house close to the first one and to the Monastery of St. Bernardine. The following summer, Anthony Mary bought a third house located between the first two. The money was supplied by himself, Ferrari and Torelli.
As for the habit, they opted for the simplified version of the cassock used by the Milanese clergy. It was dark brown because black was not yet customary, at least in Milan. For a hat, they chose the older round hat instead of the new biretta, the square hat with three projections above the crown, preferred by the younger clergy.

As the Theatines, they called themselves ***Clerics Regular*** without further specification, that is, members of the clergy living under a special rule. Their private name was Sons of Paul. The name of ***Clerics Regular of St. Paul*** was officially adopted after receiving a second and more comprehensive approbation in a solemn Bull of Paul III on July 24, 1535 in which the pope confirmed the title of ***Clerics Regular*** (*sub nomine et nuncupatione Clericorum Regularium*) and acknowledged their special devotion to St. Paul (*Qui speciali devotionis*

affectu ducti erga doctorem gentium Paullum) by granting them permission to build a church in his honor (*ecclesiam...ut primum templum...sub Paulli nomine et invocatione habere liceatas denominare!*). The official name of ***Clerics Regular of St. Paul*** was finally formalized in the Constitutions of 1579 which lasted until 1976. The more familiar name ***Barnabites*** (which prevailed over Barnabines) was given by the people in the 1550's while the Fathers officiated the church of St. Barnabas, their historical motherhouse in Milan!

THE FIRST BARNABITE COMMUNITY: 1534

A. General Characteristics

1. **YOUTH**. The average age of the community was 30. The youngest member was 20, the oldest, 37. The Founder himself was 32 which was the median age of the group. Seven died young, between the age of 35 and 49; the Founder himself died young at 36. Generally speaking, youth spells enthusiasm, a certain recklessness and, in the case of serious young people, unstinting dedication. This leads us to the second trait of our first community.

2. **PASSIONATE COMMITMENT**. I borrow this expression from Joseph Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago. In his beautiful homily for evening prayer upon taking up residence in his new see, Bernardin defined priesthood as *"a passionate commitment, a fiery-eyed vision and an insatiable thirst for holiness."* I can find no better way to describe our first confreres. Bernardin's following words would apply as well: *"The Priest is called to be a challenger, enabler, life-giver, poet of life, music-maker, dreamer of dreams."*

3. **PROFESSIONALISM**. There was no dilettantism in our first confreres. They were dead serious about prayer, about ministry and whatever preparation was required for it, like study and self-discipline.

B. Individual Characteristics

1. ANTHONY MARY ZACCARIA (1502-1539)

Without overlooking Anthony Mary's debt to Battista da Crema and to Ludovica Torelli, we must unhesitatingly state that his major contribution was in the realm of leadership. His remarkable accomplishments must also be viewed against the background of a short life. He was a priest for eleven years and a founder for nine. His untimely death left quite an amount of unfinished business, to be sure. However, let me mention his role in guiding and animating his congregation of men, working on a first constitutional draft, adopting the chapter system, inspiring his men on a very crucial moment at the eve of a trial set up by the Inquisition twenty months after the official approval of the Order. Let me recall his role in the guidance of the Angelic Sisters after Battista's death on January 1, 1534 and in the summoning of the laity to work side by side with his priests and sisters, an approach to the apostolate fully sanctioned only by Vatican II. Let me recall his contribution to the format of the Forty-Hour Devotion, his stress on frequent communion and the institution of toiling the church bells at 3:00 p.m. every Friday as a sign of devotion to Christ Crucified. And let me recall his enthusiastic response to a cardinal's invitation to extend his work outside the familiar boundaries of Milan by establishing the first Barnabite mission in the city of Vicenza in 1537. Finally, let me recall Anthony Mary's leadership in preaching and practicing his famous trilogy:

a) pure self-contempt, self-abasement, suffering and mortification;
b) pure honor of Christ, great and noble openness toward the Crucified;

c) pure service of our neighbor in view of their salvation and utmost perfection.

2. JAMES ANTHONY MORIGIA (1497-1546)

He was the first Superior General of the Order (1536-1542) and secured out the historical motherhouse of St. Barnabas by bringing to a successful conclusion the process initiated by Anthony Mary. St. Barnabas was also our only house until 1557. Morigia distinguished himself by his remarkable contemplative prayerfulness, charity and prudence.

3. BARTHOLOMEW FERRARI (1499-1544)

He was the second Superior General from 1542 to 1544, the year of his death. Rather withdrawn and introvert, he nevertheless succeeded Anthony Mary as director of the Vicenza Mission. He nourished his tireless activity with contemplative prayer and was excellent in religious instruction of children.

4. FRANCIS DA LECCO (1498-1569)

He was already a priest and a canon when he joined Anthony Mary's group in 1535 at the age of 36. Due to sickness, he soon left for home but returned after eight years, fully recovered. In the meantime, however, Anthony Mary prevailed upon him to direct the Vicenza Mission together with Ferrari. Francis gave an excellent account of himself back in St. Barnabas. He distinguished himself in religious observance and active apostolate. He returned to Vicenza several times. The last twelve years of his long and busy life he spent as director of a convent in Milan. His ill health was no obstacle. Francis kept his youthful enthusiasm to the end.

5. CAMILLUS NEGRI (1509-1544)

He was the brother of the famous Angelic Sister, Paola Antonia, who was extremely esteemed by Anthony Mary. In his ten years as a Barnabite, Camillus gave himself unsparingly. In one of his letters, Anthony Mary refers to him as "the tireless Sir Camillus."

6. FRANCIS CRIPPA (1502-1542)

Already a priest when he joined Anthony Mary's community, Francis distinguished himself by his humility. Anthony Mary himself called him "the humble Sir Francis."

7. JOHN JAMES DE CASEIS (1509-1545)

He had the distinction of being the first to receive the religious habit from Anthony Mary after the two co-founders, on June 10, 1534. Anthony Mary referred to him as "the faithful John James," in a possible reference to his unflinching determination to remain in the young community when they were accused of imperiling public order, individual dignity and the authenticity of the faith by their public display of penance, humility and devotion. This was the time of the formal trial which began on October 4, 1534.

8. DIONYSIUS DA SESTO (1506-1546)

He was the brother of the remarkable Angelic Sister, Battista da Sesto, who was the first Prioress of St. Paul's Convent in Milan. Anthony Mary referred to him as "my beloved." He opened a Barnabite Mission in Venice in 1543 which greatly benefited the Saints John and Paul's Hospital and attracted several remarkable people to join the Order: two doctors in law, one doctor of medicine, one scholarly nobleman, and the nephew of Cardinal Contarini.

9. JOHN BAPTIST (MELCHIOR) SORESINA (1514-1601)

As a young man of barely twenty years of age, Soresina was the youngest member of our community. During his long life, he remained worthy of Anthony Mary's predilection for

him. “Beloved and sweet son in Christ” was one way Anthony Mary addressed him. As a true father, Anthony Mary did not hesitate to correct him when needed. For instance, shortly before his death, Anthony Mary reminded him in a letter that true, humble obedience must be based, not on the personality of the Superiors, but strictly on faith. In all Superiors, not only in himself, Anthony Mary, Soresina must be able to see Christ, “the Shepherd of his soul,” and to act with them as he would with Christ Jesus Himself. A priest for 63 years, Soresina was the first Vicar of our Order. He accompanied Fr. Besozzi, our third Superior General, to the Verona Mission and remained there as its main animator. Among other things, he overcame his natural reluctance and assisted a man condemned to death. Back in St. Barnabas, he excelled in contemplative prayer and in the direction of the Congregation of the Married. With great skill, he managed to reform a monastery in only three months. He also initiated three new foundations. For the last 23 years of his life, he was excellent as a spiritual director. Because of his longevity, he became an unequalled source of information to our first historians. He himself authored one of our three earliest memoirs, known as Chronicles A, B, and C which were written soon after Anthony Mary’s death in 1539. Soresina wrote Chronicle C from which my opening quotation is taken.

I shall conclude with a prayer *Lord Jesus, help us to encourage one another in grace so that we may not become hardened by the lure of sin. Help us to listen to your voice until we enter your rest, completely cured and healed from our sinfulness Amen.* (Heb 3:7-14; Mk 1:40-45).